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## Taongi An Obscure Atoll on the International Stage

The *Sarah Joe*, a seventeen foot Boston Whaler with five fishermen aboard, left Hana, (Maui) Hawaii, the morning of February 11, 1979, and never returned. The Coast Guard searched the surrounding ocean for five days without success. Nine years later, the *Sarah Joe* was found 2200 miles away sitting on Taongi, an uninhabited atoll of the Marshall Islands. Nearby, in a shallow grave, were the remains of one of its fishermen, Scott Moorman.<sup>1</sup>

Taongi is a microscopic dot in the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Comprised of ten small islands, the atoll has never been permanently inhabited. The ancient Melanesians who settled the Marshallese Archipelago bypassed Taongi because the atoll was too dry to sustain a permanent settlement. Despite its seeming insignificance, Taongi has been a fixture in international affairs since its European discovery in 1526, including being at the center of a simmering feud between Los Alamos and the University of California Radiation Laboratory (UCRL).<sup>2</sup>

Taongi became a nominal possession of Spain following its discovery by Toribo Alonso de Salazar. Having nothing of value to exploit, Spain ignored the atoll, as it did all of the Marshall Islands, for next 350 years. In 1885, Spain ceded control of the Marshall Islands to Germany. Shortly thereafter, Germany laid a separate claim for Taongi, whose remoteness suggested that it was not part of the Marshallese Archipelago. Germany argued that as an uninhabited atoll, Taongi was up for grabs. After going to the trouble of claiming the atoll, Germany, too, ignored Taongi<sup>3</sup>.

When Germany abandoned all of its Pacific holdings at the onset of World War I. Japan, acting in collusion with Great Britain, occupied the Marshall Islands. Following the war, again with British collusion, The League of Nations confirmed Japan's hegemony, making the Marshall Islands a Japanese Mandate. Early in World War II, Japan placed a small seaplane base and weather station on the Taongi.<sup>4</sup> The base and weather station were both abandoned in short order because the atoll did not provide a strategic location for reconnaissance, nor could it be easily resupplied.

In early 1944 the United States took control of the Marshall Islands after battles on several of the atolls, principally Kwajalein and Enewetak. Other than an occasional reconnaissance flight, the United States, like Spain, Germany, and Japan, ignored Taongi. After the war, the United Nations, converted the League of Nations' Mandate into an American strategic trusteeship. This trusteeship allowed the United States to create the Pacific Proving Ground used for nuclear testing until 1958.

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<sup>1</sup> The Maui News, February 10, 2019. <https://www.mauinews.com/news/local-news/2019>.

<sup>2</sup> Now, of course, the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bokak\\_Atoll](https://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bokak_Atoll). Taongi is also known as Bokak Atoll.

<sup>4</sup> The abandoned facility was bombed at least once by U.S. Forces during the war.

Taongi was briefly considered as an alternative test site after the March 1954 Castle-Bravo detonation temporarily halted testing at Bikini. Nothing came of this interest, and the atoll, once again, receded into obscurity until an unfortunate organizational squabble between Los Alamos and the UCRL occurred during the 1956 Redwing test series. In essence, the UCRL objected to the unilateral control of Redwing operations by Los Alamos. The result was a quest by the UCRL for its own Pacific test site for Operation Hardtack. This quest, as UCRL scientist Walter Gibbons said, was based in part, on reducing “mutual interactions between the programs of individual agencies.”<sup>5</sup>

The UCRL focused its attention on Taongi because of the atoll’s remote location and wind patterns. Both appeared nearly ideal. The AEC authorized surveys of the atoll by both the Scripps Institute and the United States Navy.<sup>6</sup> These surveys found problems: a shallow entrance channel, a shallow lagoon, and very little land area. The UCRL proposed operating aboard ships in the open ocean off Taongi. The UCRL further proposed detonating its first device in the lagoon’s entrance, followed by successive underwater tests to excavate the lagoon. In the end, the possible use of Taongi was abandoned for budgetary reasons and then rendered moot when the Pacific Proving Ground was abandoned in the wake of the 1958 test moratorium.<sup>7</sup>

Once again, Taongi descended in obscurity until 1979 when the *Sara Joe* and Moorman’s remains were accidentally discovered during an environmental survey of the atoll. The mystery was not about where the *Sara Joe* landed, wind and ocean currents accounted for that. The real mystery was who buried Scott Moorman. Some speculate that the crew of a Chinese ship, fishing illegally in the area, did so. The mystery remains.<sup>8</sup>

After the discovery of the *Sara Joe*, Taongi became part of the unilaterally declared Dominion of Melchizedek, a spurious nation created for tax evasion purposes by an American, Mark Pendley. Pendley was able to lease the atoll from the Iroijlaplap, or paramount chief, of the Ratak (sunrise) Chain of the Marshall Islands. Although Marshallese tradition and practice, supported the lease, The Republic of the Marshall Islands refused recognition. The United States Office of the Comptroller called Pendley’s creation a major fraud. Pendley and others were convicted and imprisoned for crimes related to the Dominion.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Walter D. Gibbons, 19 February 1957.

<sup>6</sup> The AEC was initially sympathetic to another test site because operations at Bikini could be curtailed once the natives of nearby Rongelap Atoll, evacuated after Bravo, were repatriated.

<sup>7</sup> Galen Felt to Alvin Graves, Staff Study on the use of Taongi Atoll, February 1957. W. E. Ogle to A. C. Graves, Present Outlook for the Redwing Operation, April 2, 1955. TWX, Gerald Johnson to Alvin Graves, February 15, 1957. L. Sherman to A. C. Graves, The Use of Taongi, November 1, 1956.

<sup>8</sup> The Maui News, February 10, 2019. <https://www.mauinews.com/news/local-news/2019>. <https://www.melchizedek.com/history>. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bokak\\_Atoll](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bokak_Atoll). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall\\_Islands](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_Islands). The Sara Joe was returned Hana.

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominion\\_of\\_Melchizedek](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominion_of_Melchizedek).

Taongi last came on the international stage in 2003 when two ham radio operators set up a temporary radio station on the atoll, broadcasting for only a few hours.<sup>10</sup> When the station was shut down, Taongi slipped back into its customary obscurity, sited now only by the occasional ship that passes by.

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<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bokak\\_Atoll](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bokak_Atoll)

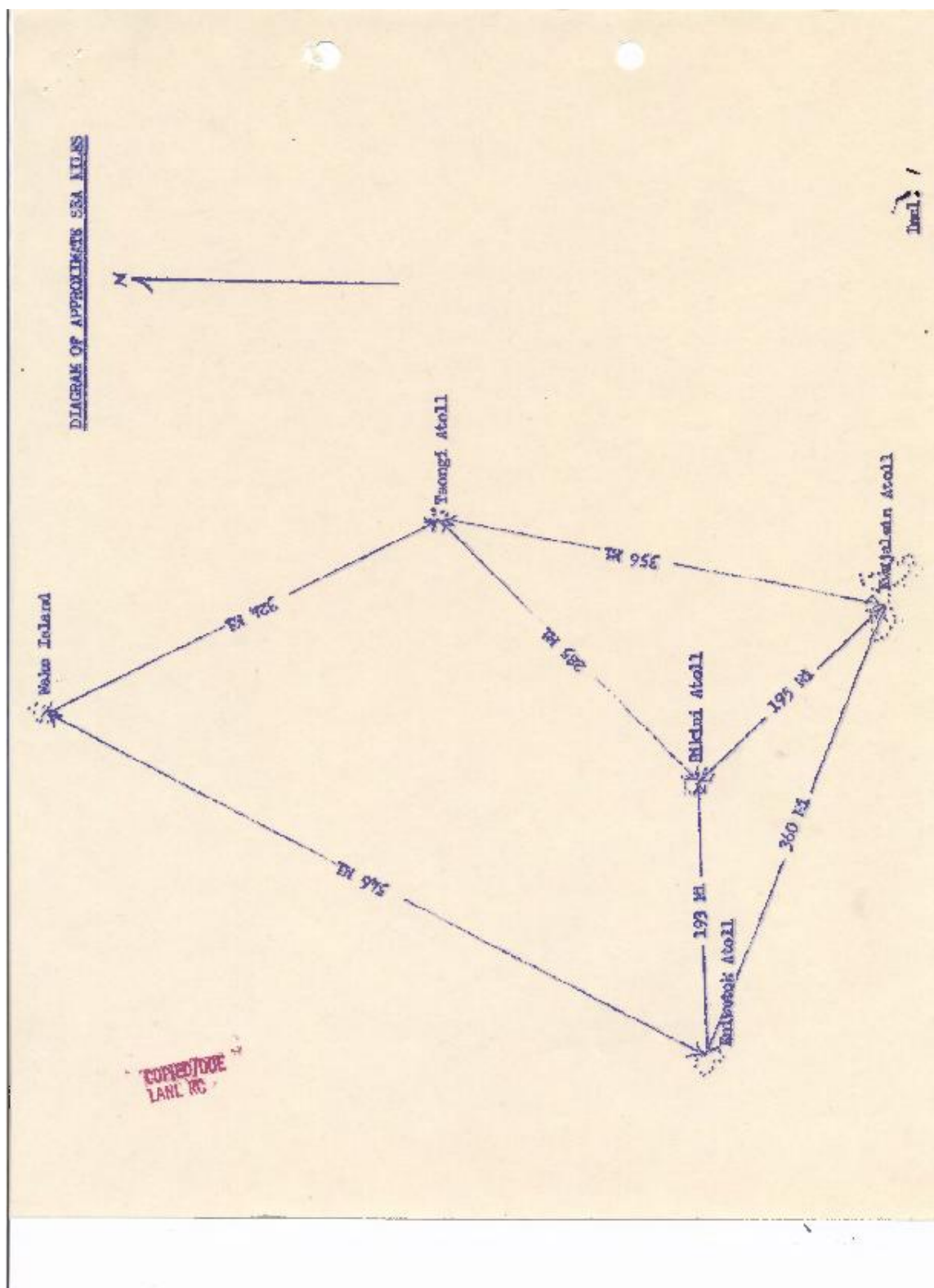


Figure 46. Taongi Sea Chart. LANL Archives.

